

# The New Aotearoa New Zealand Histories Curriculum: a Debate

22 June 2022, Scarlett Rogers.

In December 2015 a group of New Zealand students from Ōtorohanga College presented a petition to parliament with over 12,000 signatures.<sup>1</sup> The petition had three main objectives; that New Zealand acknowledges the Land Wars and how they connect with local history, for these local histories to be taught to all students through the New Zealand Curriculum, and for the Land Wars to be commemorated.<sup>2</sup> In 2019 the New Zealand Government responded to the petition's second objective and announced that the whole New Zealand Curriculum would be getting a refresh. The new Aotearoa New Zealand Histories Curriculum is part of this update and the main focus of this article.

Many scholars have voiced their opinion on the new curriculum but currently, there has been little effort from scholars to produce a forum that collates the many debates and perspectives on the new curriculum. This article aims to produce a holistic view of the many debates on the curriculum and its implementation. This article will investigate the critical perspective the new curriculum offers on colonisation in the context of wider debates about New Zealand's identity and the legacies of the past for today. This critical perspective will be explored by looking at why a new curriculum has been written, how the curriculum defines colonisation, and what it argues colonisation has done. This research will highlight what the New Zealand

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent O'Malley and Joanna Kidman, 'The New Zealand Wars and the School Curriculum', 14 November 2018, *E-Tangata*, Accessed 7 June 2022, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/the-new-zealand-wars-and-the-school-curriculum/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent O'Malley and Joanna Kidman, *Fragments from a Contested Past: Remembrance, Denial and New Zealand History* (Bridget Williams Books, 2022), 72.

curriculum aims to achieve; with particular focus on why it has taken a local history approach. I will also offer my critical perspective on the new curriculum by weighing up its strengths and limitations.

This research is significant because the teachers in Aotearoa who are expected to teach this new curriculum must be well-informed and have many resources to guide their teaching. I hope my research can give insight into what parts of New Zealand's history hold the greatest significance in shaping New Zealand's identity and should be given the most attention in the teaching of history.

For the past decade or so New Zealand teachers have had full autonomy over what they teach. This is because the current New Zealand Curriculum does not outline specific content teachers must cover.<sup>3</sup> History is currently incorporated into the social studies subject from years 1 to 10, however, social studies also cover economics and geography and the attention each subject gets is at the discretion of the teacher. Years 11 to 13 have the option to take History as a standalone subject but once again teachers have autonomy over what topics they teach their students.<sup>4</sup> Although a new curriculum is now set to be implemented in 2023, the Secretary of Education at the time Peter Hughes opposed the petition from Otorohanga College and argued that the implementation of New Zealand history was unnecessary and that the current curriculum which gives teachers autonomy is more valuable.<sup>5</sup>

However, many scholars argue that the autonomy teachers currently have is problematic because it enables the exclusion of New Zealand history from the curriculum. New

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<sup>3</sup> Melissa Bell, Scarlett Rogers, 23 May 2022, Zoom Recording, interview conducted by Scarlett Rogers.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Sheehan, 'A matter of choice: Controversial histories, citizenship, and the challenge of a high-autonomy curriculum', *Curriculum Matters*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2017): 104-105.

<sup>5</sup> O'Malley and Kidman, 'The New Zealand Wars', 1.

Zealanders have a habit of avoiding the country's contested pasts and the current curriculum only encourages this.<sup>6</sup> New Zealand citizens who have been educated through the current curriculum and especially those who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s have a very warped understanding of colonisation and early encounters between Maori and Pakeha.<sup>7</sup> Many New Zealanders believe Captain Cook was a great explorer and that early encounters between Pakeha and Maori were peaceful. This narrative has been curated by Pakeha which is problematic because it perpetuates the legacies of colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Historians Mark Sheehan and Bronwyn Wood agree that the current curriculum does not prepare students to participate as proactive citizens in the future and argue that students need to learn about histories of belonging as well as loss to grapple with political issues in the future.<sup>9</sup> Although the Ministry of Education initially opposed the petition's request, the government's refresh of the curriculum shows they now recognise how crucial it is for New Zealand history to be included in all students' education.

The new Aotearoa New Zealand Histories Curriculum has taken three years to develop and has been crafted by a range of academics, teachers, and historians.<sup>10</sup> The first draft was released for review in 2021 and the final version was published in 2022. Schools are expected to begin implementing it into their programmes for years 1 to 10 by 2023 and full implementation is expected by 2026.<sup>11</sup> One major difference from the old curriculum is that there is structured content that teachers must incorporate. This takes away a lot of the

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<sup>6</sup> Avril Bell and Elizebeth Russel, 'Aotearoa New Zealand's New National History Curriculum and Histories of Mourning', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2021): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Don Rowe, 'Difficult History: How we Remember and Forget the New Zealand Wars', 2 May 2022, *The Spin Off*, Accessed 7 June 2022, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/02-05-2022/difficult-history-how-we-remember-and-forget-the-new-zealand-wars>.

<sup>8</sup> 'Why Teaching NZ History in Aotearoa is Difficult', *Radio New Zealand*, Accessed 7 June 2022. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/audio/2018839286/why-teaching-nz-history-in-aotearoa-is-difficult>.

<sup>9</sup> Sheehan, 'A matter of choice', 112.

<sup>10</sup> Don Rowe, 'What's in the New Zealand history curriculum'. 18 March 2022, *The Spin Off*. Accessed 27 April 2022. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/18-03-2022/whats-in-the-new-new-zealand-history-curriculum>.

<sup>11</sup> NZHTA Histories Curriculum Overview: Personal Learning Development Workshop. (2022).

autonomy teachers previously had. The new framework that has been created for all subjects includes three learning pillars, understand, know, and do (See Appendix A).

The ‘understand’ pillar has four key big ideas which are, Maori history is the foundational and continuous history of Aotearoa New Zealand, colonisation and settlements have been central to Aotearoa New Zealand’s histories for the past 200 years, the course of Aotearoa New Zealand’s histories has been shaped by the use of power, and relationships and connections between people and across boundaries have shaped the course of Aotearoa New Zealand’s histories. The ‘know’ pillar focuses on contexts for exploring these big ideas. The contexts are culture and identity, government and organization, place and environment, economic activity, and local contexts. The final pillar is ‘do’, which focuses on inquiry practices such as identifying and exploring historical relationships, identifying sources and perspectives, and interpreting past experiences, decisions, and actions (See Appendix B).<sup>12 13</sup>

The new framework also has five stages of progression, each with a learning outcome.<sup>14</sup> When teachers are designing topics, they are expected to include all four big ideas from the ‘understand’ pillar and incorporate several contexts from the ‘know’ pillar. The ‘do’ pillar should be integrated into the activities that support the topic.<sup>15</sup> Each learning pillar weaves into the collective goal of “the learning that matters.” This slogan is slightly problematic when it comes to the discipline of history because what parts of history ‘matter’ is very subjective.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’s Histories in the New Zealand Curriculum’, *Ministry of Education*, Accessed 28 March 2022, 2.

<sup>13</sup> NZHTA Histories Curriculum Overview: Personal Learning Development Workshop. (2022).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Refreshing The New Zealand Curriculum’, *Ministry of Education*, Accessed 27 April 2022. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/changes-in-education/curriculum-and-assessment-changes/curriculum-refresh/>.

<sup>15</sup> NZHTA Histories Curriculum Overview: Personal Learning Development Workshop. (2022).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Refreshing The New Zealand Curriculum’. *Ministry of Education*.

Although the new curriculum is a huge step forward for New Zealand it is a highly contested document. When the government announced the curriculum refresh Minister of Education Chris Hipkins stated that the new curriculum would allow New Zealand to “move forward together, stronger”.<sup>17</sup> The new curriculum has four overarching goals to achieve this. To honour their mutual obligations to and through Te Tiriti o Waitangi, to create a curriculum that is inclusive so that all akonga see themselves, and succeed in their learning, to be clear about the learning that matters, and to make sure the curriculum is easy for teachers to use.<sup>18</sup> Historian Joanna Kidman believes that New Zealand will be able to move forward together with the incorporation of structured content, but only if it is made clear that New Zealand’s difficult histories continue to impact society.<sup>19</sup> There is the hope that addressing New Zealand’s wrongdoings in the past will bring Pakeha and Maori together. Although national cohesion could be the outcome of the new curriculum, scholars have noted that New Zealand’s controversial past and our tendency to suppress them could prevent this.<sup>20</sup>

There has been a lot of debate over what should be in the new curriculum and what parts of New Zealand’s history ‘matter’ the most. The Royal Society of New Zealand reviewed the draft that was released in 2021 and had many suggestions for improvement. They commended the big ideas and in particular that Maori history is the continuous history of New Zealand. But noted many key topics were missing from the curriculum such as women’s history, history pre-European arrival, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general. They felt there needed to be more emphasis on the economic and demographic changes over time and the diversity of New Zealand society. They also suggested a fourth big idea that recognised connections across boundaries as they felt the curriculum did not capture the connection between New

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<sup>17</sup> Bell and Russel, ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’s’, 2.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Refreshing The New Zealand Curriculum’. *Ministry of Education*.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Why Teaching NZ History in Aotearoa is Difficult’, *Radio New Zealand*.

<sup>20</sup> Bell and Russel, ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’s’, 1-3.

Zealand and the rest of the world.<sup>21</sup> Following this feedback, this fourth big idea has been included in the final curriculum document. It is evident that a lot of the suggestions from the Royal Society were taken on board and implemented in the final curriculum, however, many scholars still believe the curriculum has room for improvement.

I want to draw your attention to the big ideas of the ‘understand’ pillar, as discussed before there are four themes, all of which touch on aspects of colonisation. The curriculum defines colonisation as a global process that has shaped New Zealand both positively and negatively.<sup>22</sup> Although many academics praise the curriculum's focus on colonisation, they have also pointed out many areas where there are gaps. Professor Angela Wanhalla worries that the curriculum's focus on power in relation to colonisation is limiting because there are also social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions that need to be considered.<sup>23</sup> Other academics are concerned that the curriculum does not clearly outline that colonialism is still an ongoing process and that there is not enough emphasis on the fact that decolonisation has not yet occurred in New Zealand.<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Academic Manager at the College of Education Melissa Bell explained that the obscurity of these processes within the curriculum is problematic because many teachers, especially primary school teachers are ignorant of the impact that both processes have today.<sup>26</sup> It is important to consider these concerns seriously because the new curriculum has the potential to impact New Zealand society significantly. Historian and Senior Lecturer at the University of Otago Miranda Johnson raised a similar point to Sheehan

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’s Histories: A response to draft curriculum’, *Royal Society*, Accessed 27 April 2022, 7-9, <https://www.royalsociety.org.nz/what-we-do/our-expert-advice/all-expert-advice-papers/aotearoa-new-zealands-histories-a-response-to-draft-curriculum/>.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’s Histories in the New Zealand Curriculum’. *Ministry of Education*, Accessed 28 March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Angela Wanhalla, Scarlett Rogers, 18 May 2022, Email Correspondence, interview conducted by Scarlett Rogers.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, interview.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous interviewee, Scarlett Rogers, 22 May 2022, Email Correspondence, interview conducted by Scarlett Rogers.

<sup>26</sup> Bell, interview.

which was mentioned earlier. She questions whether the curriculum will equip students for the politics of the future. She discussed that in 10 to 20 years, students who have been educated through the new curriculum may be facing a very different world and one in which colonisation and its impacts are not at the forefront of the conversation.<sup>27</sup> The many critiques from scholars highlight that what has been included in the new curriculum is just as important as what is missing.

Turning now to the 'know' pillar with a particular focus on the contexts of culture and identity and local histories. I was interested in exploring how valuable the curriculum's focus on local history is perceived and whether it will contribute to a national understanding of New Zealand's identity. Wanhalla noted that teaching local history will enable students to take the big ideas and place them into a "less abstract and more meaningful context." She also pointed out that local histories create a space where Maori narratives can more easily be explored, this is important because they can get easily lost within national contexts.<sup>28</sup> However, several scholars have commented that this will put pressure on local Maori communities that may not have the time or resources to assist.<sup>29</sup> But if this can be achieved, Bell believes that the focus on local history will, "add to a more multi-dimensional understanding of our identity."<sup>30</sup> Few scholars have explored the link between local histories and national identity, however, I would argue that one of the intentions behind the new curriculum was to create a unified understanding of New Zealand's history and as a result a new national identity. National identity has many components and I think the new curriculum in the long term will contribute to more New Zealanders feeling a sense of belonging. One of the curriculum's overarching goals is that all akonga can see how they fit into the big picture,

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<sup>27</sup> Miranda Johnson, Scarlett Rogers, 23 May 2022, Zoom Recording, interview conducted by Scarlett Rogers.

<sup>28</sup> Wanhalla, interview.

<sup>29</sup> Bell, interview.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, interview.

which suggests that Hipkins's statement about New Zealand moving “forward together, stronger” is the goal of the curriculum.

One common criticism amongst scholars is that a local history approach could undercut national and global narratives. Johnson noted that it is unclear how local histories tie into the bigger picture.<sup>31</sup> There was also worry that students would be unaware of globalization and its impact on shaping New Zealand’s identity. This is important because although improvements in this area were made after the Royal Society’s review, scholars still feel that this area of the curriculum is lacking. This brings into question whether there perhaps should have been more than one draft before the final curriculum was published.

When it came to the ‘do’ pillar Bell offered a lot of insight as she is currently involved in aiding schools with implementing the new curriculum. She had two main concerns. Firstly, she is concerned that not all teachers agree on what the purpose of history is, especially primary school teachers who have no background in history yet are expected to implement it in their teaching. Secondly, she is concerned about the third ‘do’ element which requires teachers to make ethical judgements on the actions of others and past events. Her concern is that it takes a skilled teacher to navigate this, especially when teaching younger students.<sup>32</sup> In a professional development workshop held for teachers on the new curriculum, they discussed the importance that teachers are aware of their own biases and stated that history is “to explain not to blame.”<sup>33</sup> I think this aspect of the ‘do’ pillar will be challenging for teachers to navigate.

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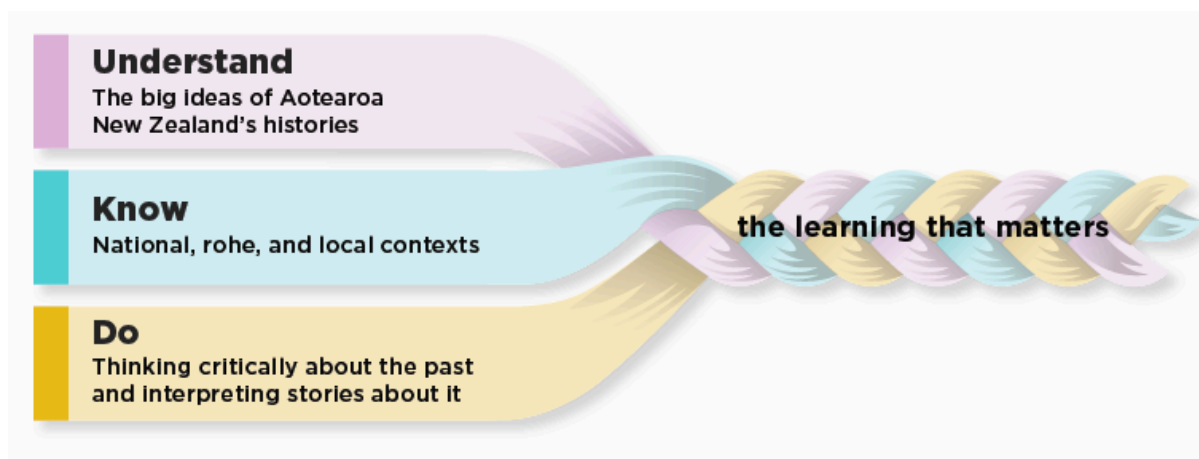
<sup>31</sup> Johnson, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Bell, interview.

<sup>33</sup> NZHTA Histories Curriculum Overview: Personal Learning Development Workshop. (2022).

This article has explored the critical perspective the new Aotearoa New Zealand Histories Curriculum offers on colonisation and compared and contrasted the many scholarly debates on why a new curriculum has been written, how the curriculum defines colonisation, and what it argues colonisation has done. It has also delved into what the curriculum aims to achieve and why it has taken a local history approach. The debates and perspectives discussed in this article have highlighted the political nature of the document and exposed both its strengths and limitations. Because of the curriculum's focus on local histories, I believe there will be a deficit in students' knowledge of global events and how local history connects nationally. The curriculum's focus on Maori narratives is imperative, however, I am concerned students of other ethnicities will struggle to see their stories within the curriculum. With so much debate over what should and should not be included in the curriculum, I think it would have been wise for the Ministry of Education to have had more than one draft released for review before the final document was published. The document is ambitious, and only time will tell to see how it contributes to New Zealand's identity and whether the Government's vision for the curriculum is met. Despite the curriculum's limitations, it is a positive step forward for New Zealand and a testament to how powerful the voices of young New Zealand citizens are; if it was not for the students from Otorohanga College the development of a new curriculum may not have been produced so soon.

## Appendices



### Appendix A

| Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories Content   |                             |   |
|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Understand<br>Big ideas  | Know<br>Contexts            | Do<br>Practices                                       |
| Māori history is the foundational and continuous history of Aotearoa New Zealand.  | Government and organisation | Identifying and exploring historical relationships    |
| Colonisation and settlement have been central to Aotearoa New Zealand's histories for the past 200 years.                      | Culture and identity        | Identifying sources and perspectives                  |
| The course of Aotearoa New Zealand's histories has been shaped by the use of power.  | Place and environment       | Interpreting past experiences, decisions, and actions |
| Relationships and connections between people and across boundaries have shaped the course of Aotearoa New Zealand's histories. | Economic activity           |   |

### Appendix B

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